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SUBJECT: STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS -- TWO WEEKS AWAY

REF: 08 CARACAS 1526

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: With just over two weeks until state and local elections, the opposition remains relatively disorganized, divided in some races, and increasingly pessimistic about its election prospects. Moreover, there appears to be more electoral fatigue than excitement in most races. The GBRV disqualified Yaracuy State consensus opposition gubernatorial candidate Eduardo Lapi (Reftel) and may be preparing to do the same to other strong opposition candidates in Miranda and Zulia. President Chavez is dominating the airwaves with near daily mandatory broadcast "cadenas" and campaigning hard on behalf of United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) candidates in battleground states. Opposition leaders tell us campaign donations are down from a fearful private sector and consequently they lack resources to mobilize voters. We currently assess that the opposition has frontrunner gubernatorial candidates in five states and contenders in three other states. End Summary.

OPPOSITION TRIPPING ITSELF UP

12. (C) The opposition appears beset by poor organization and a growing sense of pessimism. In the past week, one party leader and one campaign manager have solicited campaign financing from the USG. They noted that private businesses, fearful of GBRV retribution, are not contributing much, while the PSUV is able to tap vast (public) resources. COPEI party activist Anibal Sanchez told us that in Merida, the consensus mayoral opposition candidate has both old and new campaign posters advertising the gubernatorial and mayoral races. He switched from the gubernatorial to the mayoral race to foster opposition unity, but many voters reportedly think the opposition candidate is being "greedy" and trying to win both races.

13. (C) The Supreme Court decision to disqualify Eduardo Lapi from the gubernatorial race (Reftel) has left the opposition debating whether to nominate Lapi's brother in his place or a local Primero Justicia leader. Multiple opposition candidates continue to vie against each other in many mayoral races, including three of Caracas' five boroughs. Moreover, the GBRV appears to be building a case to either disqualify or prosecute opposition Maracaibo mayoral candidate Manuel Rosales and Miranda gubernatorial candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski. The Supreme Court ruled November 6 not to disqualify consensus opposition Carabobo State gubernatorial

candidate Henrique Salas Feo, a former two-term governor, from running again.

14. (C) New polling indicates that the opposition's inability to settle on a single gubernatorial candidate in Bolivar State is likely to cost them that race. The two contenders, former Chavista Antonio Rojas Suarez and The Radical Cause leader Andres Velasquez both say they are unwilling to bow out of the race, despite splitting the opposition's vote. According to a late September Varianzas Opinion poll, incumbent governor Francisco Rangel Gomez's unfavorability ratings are relatively high and either opposition candidate would likely defeat him -- if the other opposition candidate withdraws. Polling from the Seijas-IVAD polling firm predicted a similar electoral split between the candidates. There is a rumor in opposition circles that Rojas Suarez is receiving support from the GBRV to steal votes from Velasquez.

CHAVEZ STUMPING HARD

15. (C) By contrast, the PSUV electoral machinery appears to be gaining momentum. Chavez has held mandatory broadcast "cadenas" nearly every day over the past week in states with key races, including Cojedes, Barinas, Zulia, Tachira, and Miranda. He has also held large campaign rallies in these states and lifted the hand of every PSUV mayoral candidate in those states on stage. Although the tone of the cadenas has shifted from lambasting opponents to extolling social missions and promising infrastructure improvements, the length and frequency of Chavez's discourses have increased significantly. In response to complaints that Chavez is abusing his cadena privilege, the President responded, "he who wants to use cadenas should become president." During a

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November 4 rally in Miranda State, Chavez warned against abstentionism, telling his audience that "those who call themselves Bolivarians and do not vote are, in effect, voting against me."

16. (SBU) A recent Datanalisis poll conducted from August 30 through September 10 shows that Chavez's approval ratings remain relatively strong at 58 percent, a small recovery from his 52 percent low in February -- the same approval he had during the failed recall referendum in August 2004. University student activists received the highest approval rating of any Venezuelan group in the poll, including ahead of the Catholic Church, at 83 percent. The opposition, however, received the lowest rating of the groups, just 40 percent. The PSUV and National Electoral Council (CNE) received 50 and 57 percent approval ratings, respectively.

COMPLICATED BALLOTING

17. (C) On October 31, the CNE authorized the use of "chuleta" cheat sheets at the polling station to help voters expedite the complicated voting process on election day. In some regions, voters will have to select up to nine candidates within a three minute time window. Pro-opposition daily El Nacional assessed that the average time spent voting is likely to exceed the time window, warning it would lead to a significant number of nullified votes, long lines, and late closings for poll stations. On November 3, the opposition initiated a plan to distribute 10 million chuletas, while the PSUV, which began handing them out two weeks ago, pledged to increase production to 16 million. They are particularly crucial for the large number of poorly educated voters.

18. (C) Venezuela has held national elections, referenda, or state and local elections for several consecutive years, and most Venezuelans appear to be exhibiting election fatigue rather than excitement. With only two weeks to go, both

pro-government and opposition parties appear to be competing against abstentionism more than each other. During recent televised campaign rallies, Chavez has quizzed and scolded local ward leaders ("patrulleros") for not having in hand their election day mobilization lists. An opposition activist told us that this is the "coldest" electoral environment in which he has worked.

Comment

¶9. (C) Opposition gubernatorial candidates appear to be running well in five states and may be competitive in three other states. At the same time, opposition leaders are actively trying to temper their supporters' expectations. In the wake of the defeat of the constitutional referendum in December 2007, some opposition leaders had openly speculated about winning half of Venezuela's 22 gubernatorial races, but no longer. The opposition currently has two opposition governors (and two more counting formerly pro-government Podemos Party governors).

¶10. (C) After some initial excitement, most local pundits are now expressing pessimism that PSUV dissidents and Patria Para Todos (PPT) candidates will be able to defeat the Chavez-endorsed candidates in PSUV strongholds. With few resources behind them, opposition parties and pro-Chavez dissidents are hoping Venezuelans "punish" PSUV candidates at the polls for poor administration and corruption at the state and local levels. PSUV activists are banking on Chavez's sustained popularity and endorsements, as well as their tremendous resource advantage, to deliver an overwhelming majority of PSUV victories at the polls on November 23. End Comment.

CAULFIELD